

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Triangle Communications Easement Application A portion of the Big Timber FTTH upgrade project
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring 2024
Proponent:	Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.)
Location:	SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ & NE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 East NE $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$ & SE $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East (Common Schools Trust)
County:	Sweet Grass County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The proponent, Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.), is applying for 2 new 20' wide easement in order to install a fiber optic telecommunications line located on SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ & NE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 East and the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$ & SE $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County, as shown in 'Exhibit A.' The proposed route will follow a privately eased road to minimize disturbance. The proposed route generally follows Old U.S. Highway 10 and a private roadway.

The two new easements are part of a larger project where TTCA, Inc. is installing, upgrading, and replacing portions of their telecommunications lines in rural Sweet Grass County. The project consists of installing new fiber optic lines, as well as replacing outdated existing copper services with fiber optic lines to provide Fiber to the Home (FTTH) service in remote areas.

The proposed rights-of way will encumber the following acreage:

Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 East – 1.20-acres

Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East – 1.83-acres

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. The proponent has obtained a Settlement of Damages form from the grazing lessee.

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

The proponent will secure all necessary permits prior to construction.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue the two new 20' wide easements to Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) for the installation of fiber optic cable across Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 and Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the two new 20' wide easements to Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) for the installation of fiber optic cable across Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 and Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County.

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.

The route proposed in the easement generally follows Old U.S. Highway 10 and a private road.

The land area is categorically considered Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairies interspersed with small portions of Big Sagebrush Steppe and according to the NRCS Soil Survey, the area consists of a clay loam soil type with small portions of silty loam across the general easement area. The fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using the direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for cable installation, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

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.

The proposed easement does not cross any water system or source. A portion of the proposed route runs adjacent to a ditch system, but no disturbance to the ditch will occur. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing the proposed action.

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.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the fiber optic cable. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

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 land classification is considered Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairies interspersed with small portions of Big Sagebrush Steppe. Grasses typically comprise the greatest canopy cover with Western Wheatgrass being the dominant species. The cable is proposed to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. The area disturbed by the trenching activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation.

The proposed easement corridors generally follows Old U.S. Highway 10 and an existing private road that has been previously disturbed. No significant long term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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.

A variety of big game (mainly antelope and deer), small mammals, raptors, and songbirds may traverse the subject sections. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns during construction. The proposed alternative generally follows Old U.S. Highway 10 and an existing private road easement. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

No significant or long-term adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following species of concern in the proposed sections:

- **B - Bald Eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)), **Great Blue Heron** (*Ardea herodias*), **Veery** (*Catharus fuscescens*), **Golden Eagle** (*Aquila chrysaetos*), **Greater Sage-Grouse** (*Centrocercus urophasianus*)
- **R - Greater Short-horned Lizard** (*Phrynosoma hernandesi*)
- **M - Little Brown Myotis** (*Myotis lucifugus*)
- **F - Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout** (*Oncorhynchus clarkii bouvieri*),

Along with the species listed, Bat Roosts (Non-cave) have been discovered in the area. There are also potential species of concern that have the possibility of having habitats or being observed in the surrounding area.

The area falls with the General Sage Grouse General Habitat. The proponent has completed and submitted a consultation through the Sage Grouse Program and has provided copy to the DNRC Trust Lands Management Division. Aquatic species of concern were noted in the database; however, no water source will be disturbed during the proposed alternative.

None of the species listed above were observed on the parcel, but habitats are within the general area.

Due to the nature of the proposed action, the installation of underground fiber optic cable, following Old U.S. Highway 10 and a private roadway which are previously disturbed areas, it is not expected to have a significant long-term effect on any of the species identified on or around this parcel. The surface disturbance will be temporary and located parallel and adjacent to an existing private road.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

The following cultural and paleontological surveys have been documented on the section:

- 2001-5-1 – No Cultural or Paleontological Resources identified.
- 2002-5-7 – No Cultural or Paleontological Resources identified.
- 2004 – 24SW0325: Travel, Railroad, Stage Route
- 2001 – 24SW0736: Irrigation System-Canal/Ditch/Diversion Dam
- 1977 – 24SW0121: Surface Stone Quarry

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. Additionally, during a site visit on October 10, 2023 by Area Planner Joe Holzwarth, a visual inspection was performed, and no cultural or paleontological resources were identified.

The proposed project will have *No Effect to Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

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.

The proposed alternative would result in the installation of underground fiber optic cable adjacent to Old U.S. Highway way and an existing private road. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is an underground fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. Therefore, no significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 known studies or future actions planned for this Trust land parcel. The parcel was nominated for sale by the grazing lessee.

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.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

The location of the easement does not traverse any crop lands. No significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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.

The proposed action will have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

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.

The proposed action will have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

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 implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

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.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans. Any further development of the State or private land would require review additional local government review.

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.

The subject parcels are legally accessible via Old U.S. Highway 10. The project consists of installing a fiber optic line generally following Old U.S. Highway 10 and a private road. In addition, the project will only last a short duration. The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have a long-term adverse impact on recreational use of these Trust land parcels.

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.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

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

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

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 Common Schools Trust Permanent Fund will benefit by getting a one-time fee of \$1,320.00 from Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) for the new ±1.10-acre easement.

The Common Schools Trust Permanent Fund will benefit by getting the following one-time fees:

Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 East: New ±1.20-acre Easement – **\$1,440.00**

Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East: New ±1.83-acre Easement – **\$2,196.00**

The total the Common Schools Trust would benefit is: **\$3,636.00**

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Joe Holzwarth Title: Area Planner, Southern Land Office	Date: 30 October 2023
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V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that the State issues new easements Triangle Communications to install new underground fiber optic line in their proposed easement corridors on the following Trust land parcels:

Section 11, Township 1 South, Range 13 East: New ±1.20 Easement

Section 36, Township 1 North, Range 13 East: New ±1.83 Easement

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easements and installation of underground fiber optic cable. The installation and disturbance are expected to be completed in a short time-frame. The easement generally follows Old U.S. Highway 10 and an existing private roadway that has previously been disturbed. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the parcels that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS

More Detailed EA

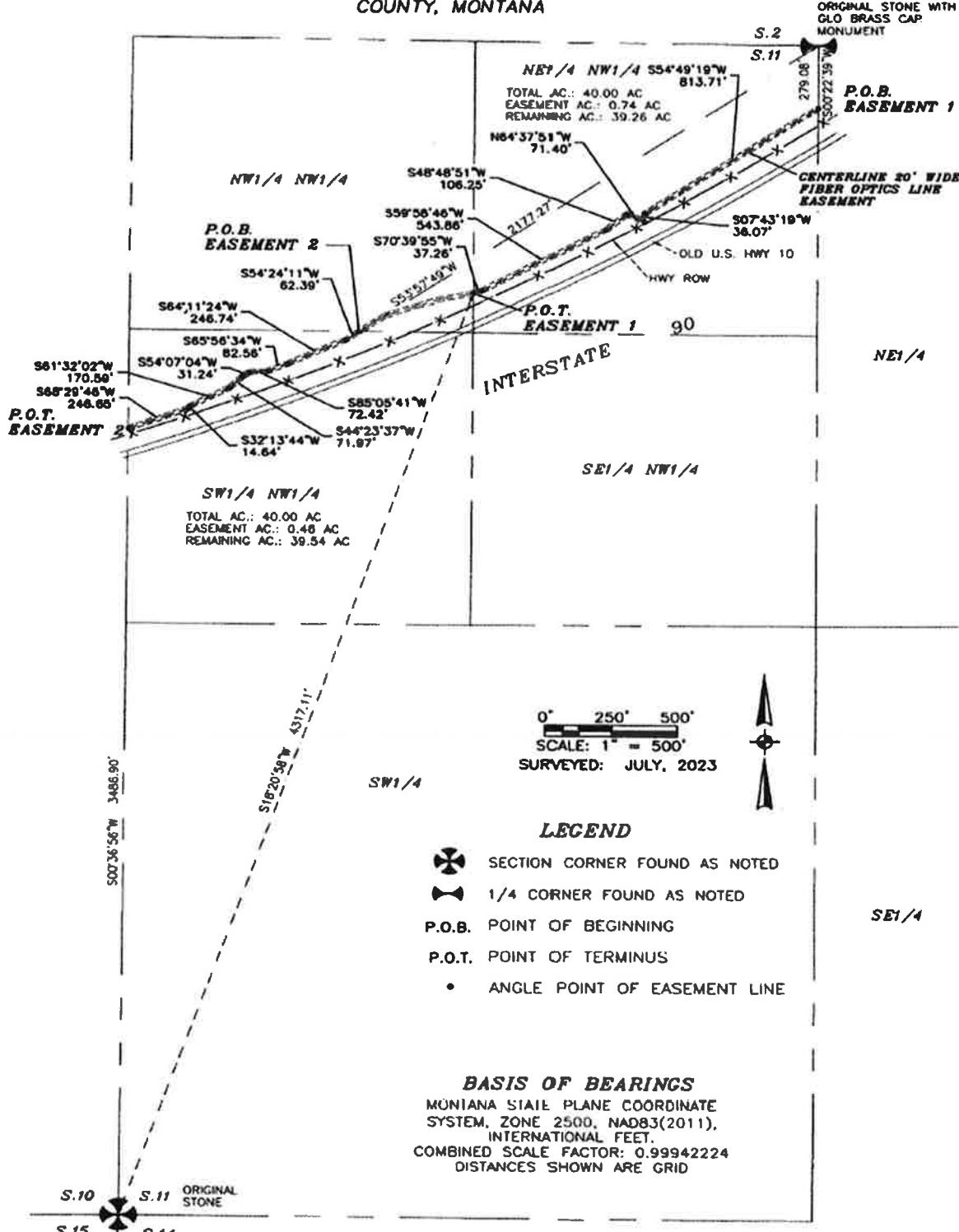
No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Scott Aye Title: Lands Program Manager – Eastern Land Office	
Signature:		Date: 10-30-2023

Exhibit A –Proposed Easement Section 11-T1S-R13E

EXHIBIT "A"

EXHIBIT A
UNDERGROUND FIBER OPTICS EASEMENT ACROSS STATE LANDS LOCATED IN
SECTION 11, TOWNSHIP 1 SOUTH, RANGE 13 EAST, P.M.M. SWEET GRASS
COUNTY, MONTANA



SURVEYED BY:

ESSEX SURVEYING, LLC
1350 PK ROAD, SHEPHERD, MT
406-685-5188

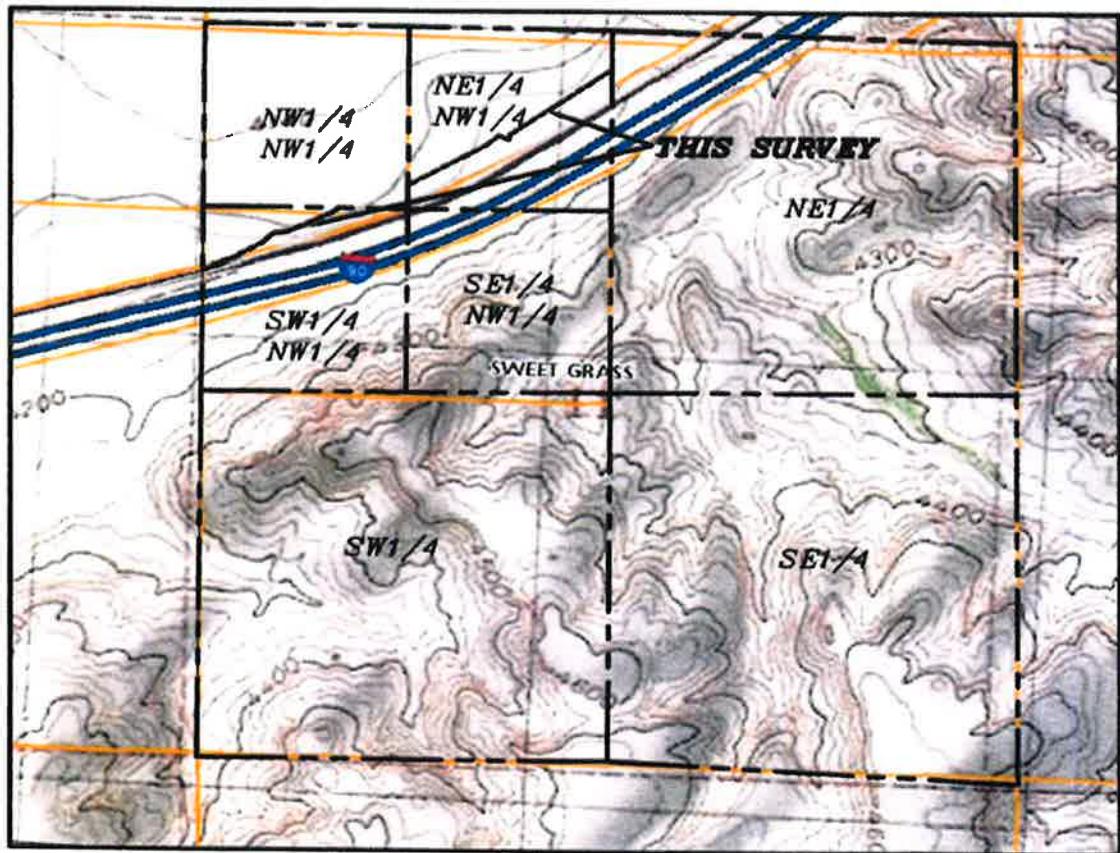
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EXHIBIT "A"
UNDERGROUND FIBER OPTICS EASEMENT ACROSS STATE LANDS LOCATED IN
SECTION 11, TOWNSHIP 1 SOUTH, RANGE 13 EAST, P.M.M. SWEET GRASS
COUNTY, MONTANA



BASIS OF BEARINGS
MONTANA STATE PLANE COORDINATE
SYSTEM, ZONE 2500, NAD83(2011),
INTERNATIONAL FEET.
COMBINED SCALE FACTOR: 0.99942224
DISTANCES SHOWN ARE GRID

VICINITY MAP



SURVEYED BY:
ESSEX SURVEYING, LLC
1350 PK ROAD, SHEPHERD, MT
406-665-5188

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Exhibit A –Proposed Easement Section 36-T1N-R13E

EXHIBIT "A"

UNDERGROUND FIBER OPTICS EASEMENT ACROSS STATE LANDS LOCATED IN
SECTION 36, TOWNSHIP 1 NORTH, RANGE 13 EAST, P.M.M. SWEET GRASS
COUNTY, MONTANA



0' 250' 500'

SCALE: 1" = 500'
SURVEYED: JUNE, 2023

BASIS OF BEARINGS

MONTANA STATE PLANE COORDINATE
SYSTEM, ZONE 2500, NAD83(2011),
INTERNATIONAL FEET.
COMBINED SCALE FACTOR: 0.99942224
DISTANCES SHOWN ARE GRID

LEGEND

- CORNER FOUND AS NOTED
- P.O.B. POINT OF BEGINNING
- P.O.T. POINT OF TERMINUS
- ANGLE POINT OF EASEMENT LINE

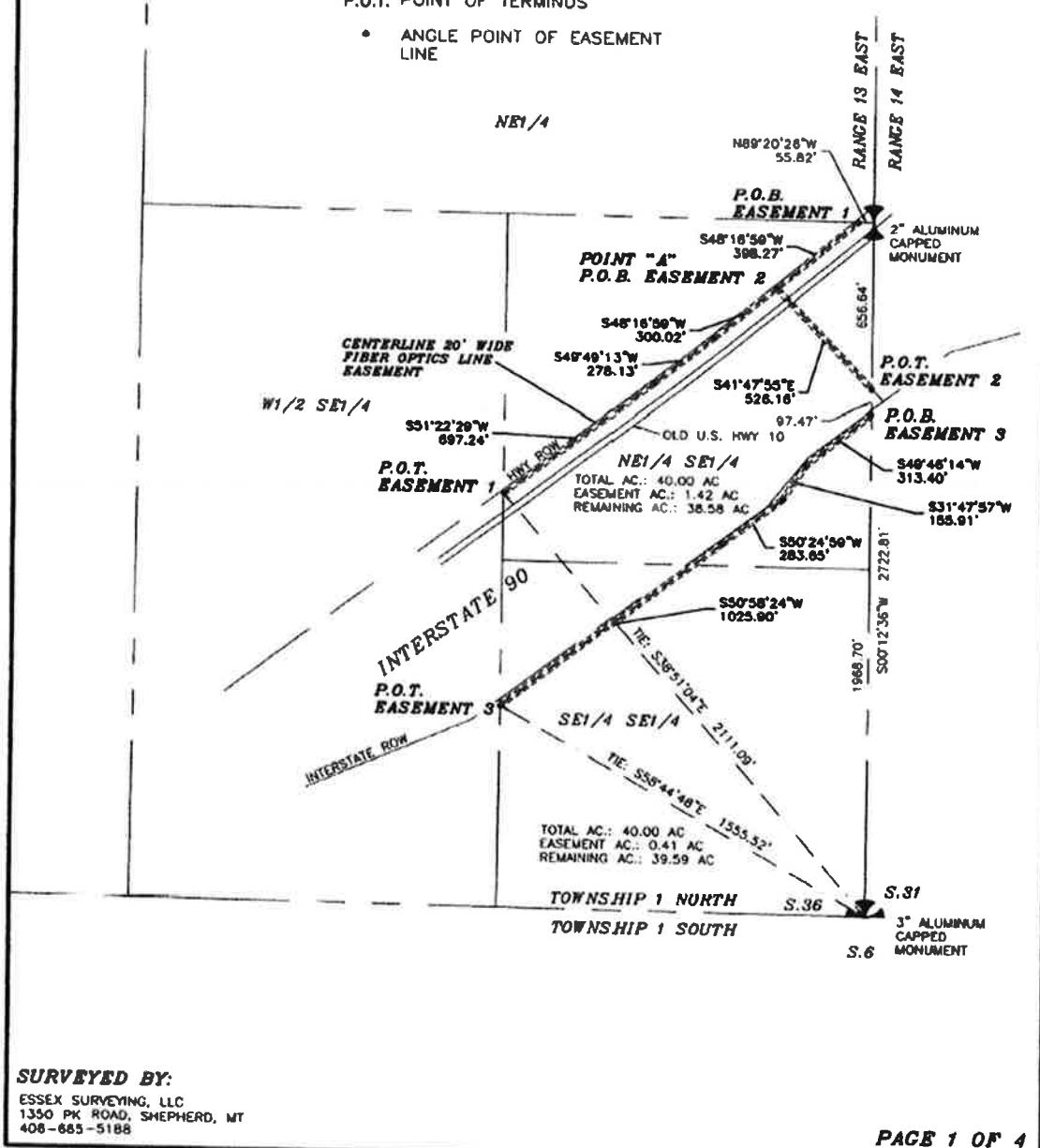


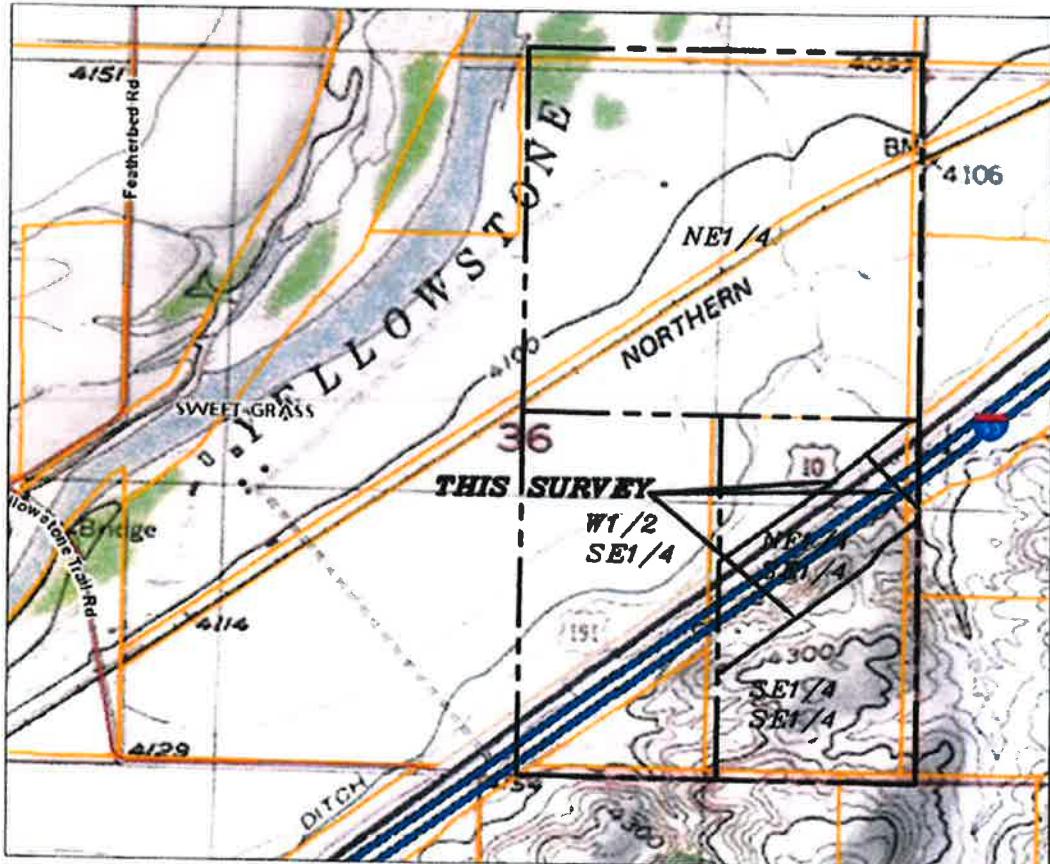
EXHIBIT "A"
UNDERGROUND FIBER OPTICS EASEMENT ACROSS STATE LANDS LOCATED IN
SECTION 36, TOWNSHIP 1 NORTH, RANGE 13 EAST, P.M.M. SWEET GRASS
COUNTY, MONTANA

BASIS OF BEARINGS

MONTANA STATE PLANE COORDINATE
SYSTEM, ZONE 2500, NAD83(2011),
INTERNATIONAL FEET,
COMBINED SCALE FACTOR: 0.99942224
DISTANCES SHOWN ARE GRID



VICINITY MAP



SURVEYED BY:

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