

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Smith River Powerline
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer of 2025
Proponent:	Northwestern Energy
Location:	T19N R2E Section 35
County:	Cascade

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

Northwestern Energy has submitted an easement application to authorize a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline located in T19N R2E Section 35 over the Smith River which is defined as a navigable river under state trust land ownership. The Montana State Board of Land Commissioners may grant easements pursuant to MCA 77-2-101, 102 and 104, 77-1-1112 and 1115 for this purpose. The route selected for the proposed easement is the most feasible option to serve the surrounding area and their customers. The proposed easement is approximately 90.16 feet long by 30 feet wide, encompassing 0.062 acres. See the attached exhibits for the proposed easement route and location.

Exhibits:

- Exhibit A: Vicinity Map
- Exhibit B: Aerial Photo with Easement Location Indicated

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 Wildlife Biologist, Alex Kunkel

Comment: area is winter elk range and year-round antelope range. Constructing the utilities outside of the wintering elk movements would be helpful to mitigate impacts to wintering elk.

Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Archaeologist, Patrick Rennie
Montana Natural Heritage Program

Public outreach was limited to the list above due to the larger impacted project corridor outside of State Trust Land (the impacted Trust Land involves a smaller segment of the proposed route) resulting in the supposition that local area residents are well informed of the project and the evident need for the replacement of important energy infrastructure. No comments in opposition were received by DNRC.

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

The proposed easements would involve Montana State Trust Land allocated to the Public Lands Trust (Navigable Rivers). Approval of the project is contingent on the proponent obtaining all necessary and lawful permits, licenses, and authorizations from the appropriate entities.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

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

Alternative B: Action Alternative: Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 following information was derived from Web Soil Survey for this section. The proposed easement would be located on a "Straw-Rivra complex" soil type. This soil type is rated as "well suited" for reclamation suitability. There will be no infrastructure or disturbance occurring inside state ownership. No cumulative impacts are anticipated to soils.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to geology and soils would occur.

Alternative B (Action): Action Alternative: Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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.

Due to the powerline running over the river and no infrastructure being placed inside the waterway, no impacts to water quality, quantity, and distribution are expected.

Minimal cumulative impacts to water quality, quantity and distribution are anticipated.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to water quality, quantity and distribution would occur.

Alternative B (Action): Action Alternative: Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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.

Some short-term dust from the machinery and vehicles traveling the proposed powerline areas during installation is anticipated, but no long-term effects to air quality are expected.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to air quality would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline. Minimal impacts to air quality are expected to occur.

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.

There is no vegetation in the proposed easement area other than aquatic vegetation under the Smith River. The powerline would be over the river so no impacts to the aquatic vegetation are expected.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to vegetation cover, quantity, and quality would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline. Minimal impacts to vegetation are expected to occur.

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.

Montana FWP was contacted for comment, and they stated that the area is winter elk range and year-round antelope range. Constructing the utilities outside of the wintering elk movements would be helpful to mitigate impacts to wintering elk. The scope of this analysis is limited to the segment of the Smith River that is considered navigable and under the ownership of the State of Montana. This small area under the overhead powerline from the low watermark to low watermark will have little to no impact on elk winter habitat.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to terrestrial, avian, and aquatic life and habitats would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 Montana Natural Resource Information Service (NRIS) was queried for information regarding sensitive or endangered species located near the proposed easement area. Species that have habitat polygons occurring in the proposed power line location include: the Golden Eagle.

There will be potential negative impacts to avian wildlife, including the species of concern that were found in this area. It will be the proponent's responsibility to consult with wildlife experts and mitigate potential dangers to wildlife.

Cumulative impacts are anticipated to unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

The DNRC archeologist was consulted, and he did not have any comments or concerns with the project. This EA only pertains to the easement area which encompasses the Smith River. The overhead power line would have no impacts to any historical and archaeological sites under the riverbed.

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 easement is in a rural part of Cascade County. There are other powerlines in the general area, so aesthetics isn't expected to change from a distance. Due to the recreational volume on the Smith River, people will notice the transmission line when recreating. Aesthetics of the area would be slightly altered with the proposed infrastructure.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to aesthetics would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 demands for environmental resources of land water, air or energy are expected as a result of this proposed easement.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 studies, plans, or projects were identified during the scoping for these proposed easements.

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.

Normal risks to human health and safety associated with overhead powerlines will occur. No abnormal or unacceptable safety risks to human health and safety are anticipated.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to human health and safety would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

If approved, this proposed easement is designed to supply neighboring customers in the agricultural industry with power.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. Direct impacts to industrial, commercial and agriculture activities and production would occur. If not approved, the proponent would not be able to provide power to their customers.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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.

Potential creation or elimination of permanent jobs in the area are not expected as a result of the proposed project.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to quantity and distribution of employment would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 significant increase in tax revenues is expected as a result of these proposed easements.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to local and state tax base and tax revenues would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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.

No increased demand for government services is expected as a result of these proposed easements.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to demand for government services would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 locally adopted environmental plans will be affected by these proposed easements.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to locally adopted environmental plans and goals would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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.

These proposed easements will not negatively alter recreational activities in the area. The powerline would be suspended over the river. No effects are expected.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to access to and quality of recreational and wilderness activities would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 change in population will result from these proposed easements.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

No change in social structures and mores are expected as a result of these proposed easements.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to social structures and mores would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

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

The proposed easements have no anticipated affects to the unique quality of the area.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to cultural uniqueness and diversity would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

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 proposed easement over State Trust Lands would generate approximately \$500.84 in revenue for the Public Lands Trust.

\$8,078/ac. x 0.062 acres = \$500.84 (19N 2E 35 Public Lands Trust)

This proposed easement would enable the proponent to install, utilize, and maintain the proposed overhead power line to supply their customers with power.

Alternative A (No Action): No work would occur. No direct impacts to other appropriate social and economic circumstances would occur.

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline. The Public Lands Trust would generate revenue through this easement on state lands.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Dylan Craft, Andy Burgoyne	Date: 2/13/2025
	Title: Land Use Specialist- Helena Unit, CLO Trust Land Program Manager	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Two Alternatives presented and fully analyzed in the EAC.

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

Alternative B: Recommend approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners to grant an easement to the proponent to authorize the installation, operation, and maintenance of a 25kV overhead, distribution powerline.

On behalf of the DNRC I have selected Alternative B: Action Alternative.

- The Action Alternative will benefit the surrounding area with new infrastructure.
- The lands involved in the project are held by the State of Montana in trust for the support of specific beneficiary institutions. This project is consistent with MCA 77-1-601 and MCA 77-1-202.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

After Reviewing the two Alternatives, I find that the Action Alternative will have no significant adverse impacts on the Physical Environment or the Human Population.

No secondary or cumulative impacts have been identified

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:

3/20/25

Exhibit A:

19N 2E Sec. 35- Vicinity Map

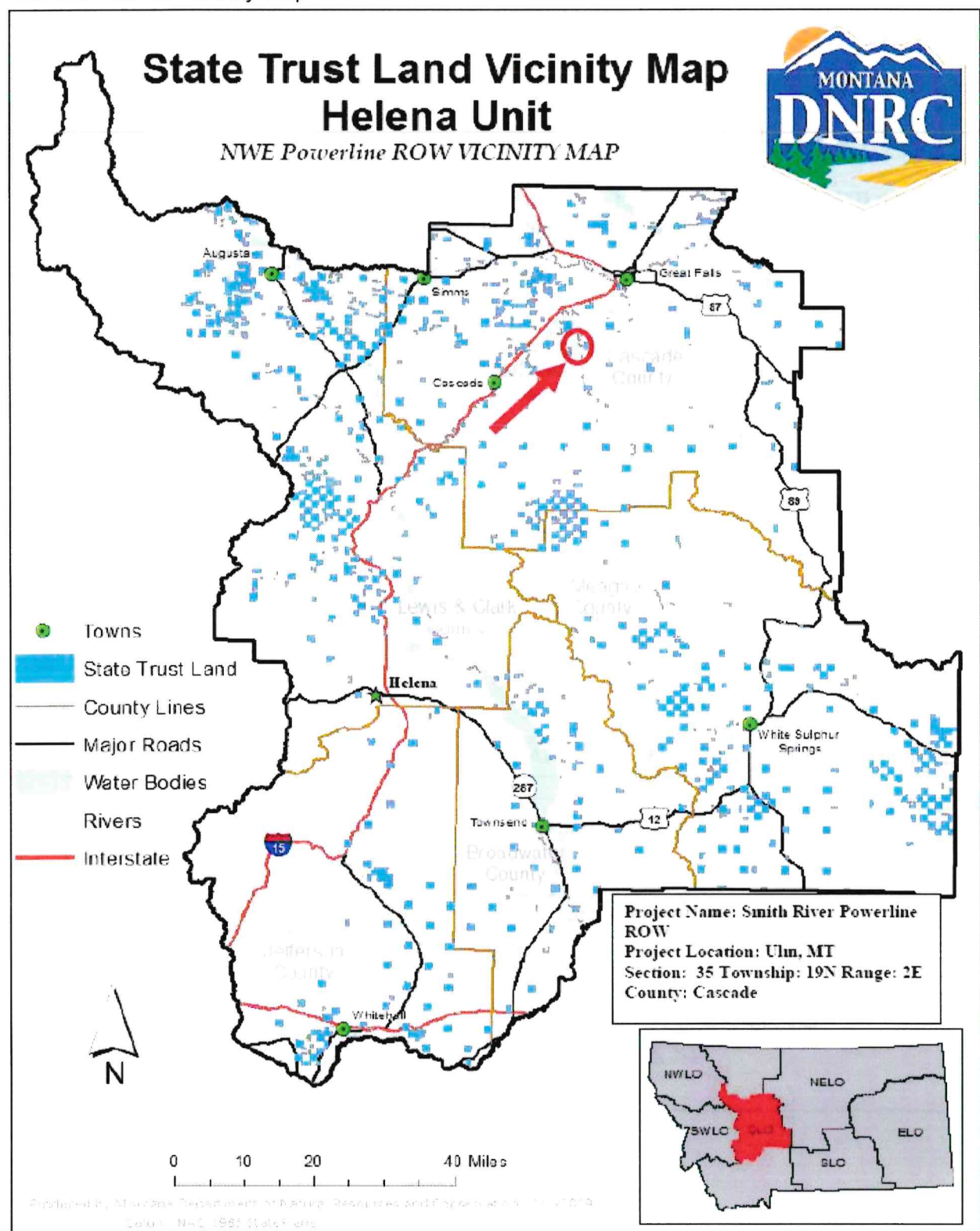


Exhibit B:

19N 2E Sec. 35- Proposed Easement indicated by the question mark icon.

