Draft Environmental Assessment

Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Region 1
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901
Phone 406-752-5501

Draft Environmental Assessment Checklist

Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA

June 2020

Part I. Proposed Action Description

1. Type of Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is seeking comment on a request from Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. (Eureka, MT), to modify their existing right-of-way easement on the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WRWMA). The modifications would reflect the removal of a portion of overhead power line from the WRWMA, and the installation of a buried line along existing WRWMA roadways. Please see #10 (Alternative B – Proposed Action), for a detailed description of the proposed action.

2. Need for Action

On November 27, 2019, a major wind event hit northwest Montana, resulting in significant timber blowdown on portions of the WRWMA and knocking down power lines and utility poles operated by Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. (Lincoln Electric). Lincoln Electric currently holds two historic, 20-foot right-of-way easements to operate and maintain approximately 2 miles of overhead power line on portions of the WRWMA (Figure 1). These easements were obtained prior to FWP acquisition of the WRWMA in 1978 and provide power to landowners east and west of the WRWMA.

The WRWMA is managed with the primary objective of providing winter range for elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep. While nearly all forested habitat on the WRWMA (approx. 600 acres) was impacted to some extent by the blowdown, approximately 50 acres located in the southern portion of the WRWMA, T37NR26W S 18 were severely impacted. Approximately 0.86 miles of powerline span this area and were severely damaged by the blowdown.

Given the 2019 wind event, and a similar occurrence in 2009, Lincoln Electric is requesting that their right-of-way easements be modified to permit the replacement of approximately 0.86 miles of overhead powerline with approximately 0.65 miles of buried powerline along existing WRWMA roadways (Figure 2). This action would mitigate any future concerns of trees falling on the overhead lines, provide easier access for Lincoln Electric maintenance staff, and provide several benefits to the WRWMA, which include:

- Mitigating the risk of an accidental fire on the WRWMA.
- Returning portions of the WRWMA to a more natural aesthetic
- Improving big game winter security by moving the right-of-way easement to existing roads and allowing utility maintenance consistent with WRWMA closure dates

- Minimizing the spread of noxious weeds via overhead line maintenance equipment
- Reducing the potential of avian collision with overhead lines on the WRWMA
- Reducing the potential of wildlife or human electrocution from downed overhead lines
- Improving safety when conducting aerial game surveys on the WRWMA
- Smaller utility easement footprint on the WRWMA

Figure 1. Existing Powerlines on WRWMA MONTANA **FWP**

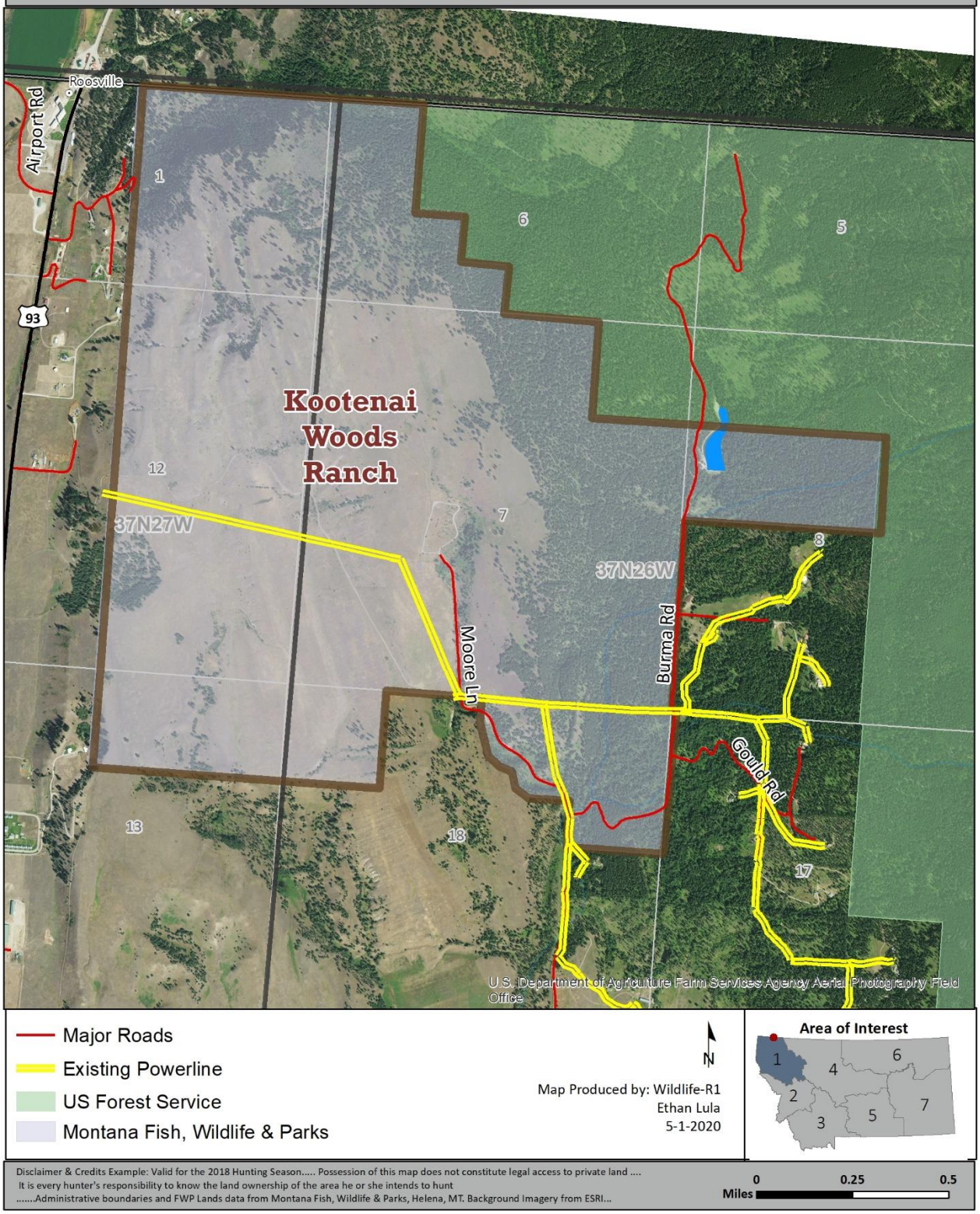
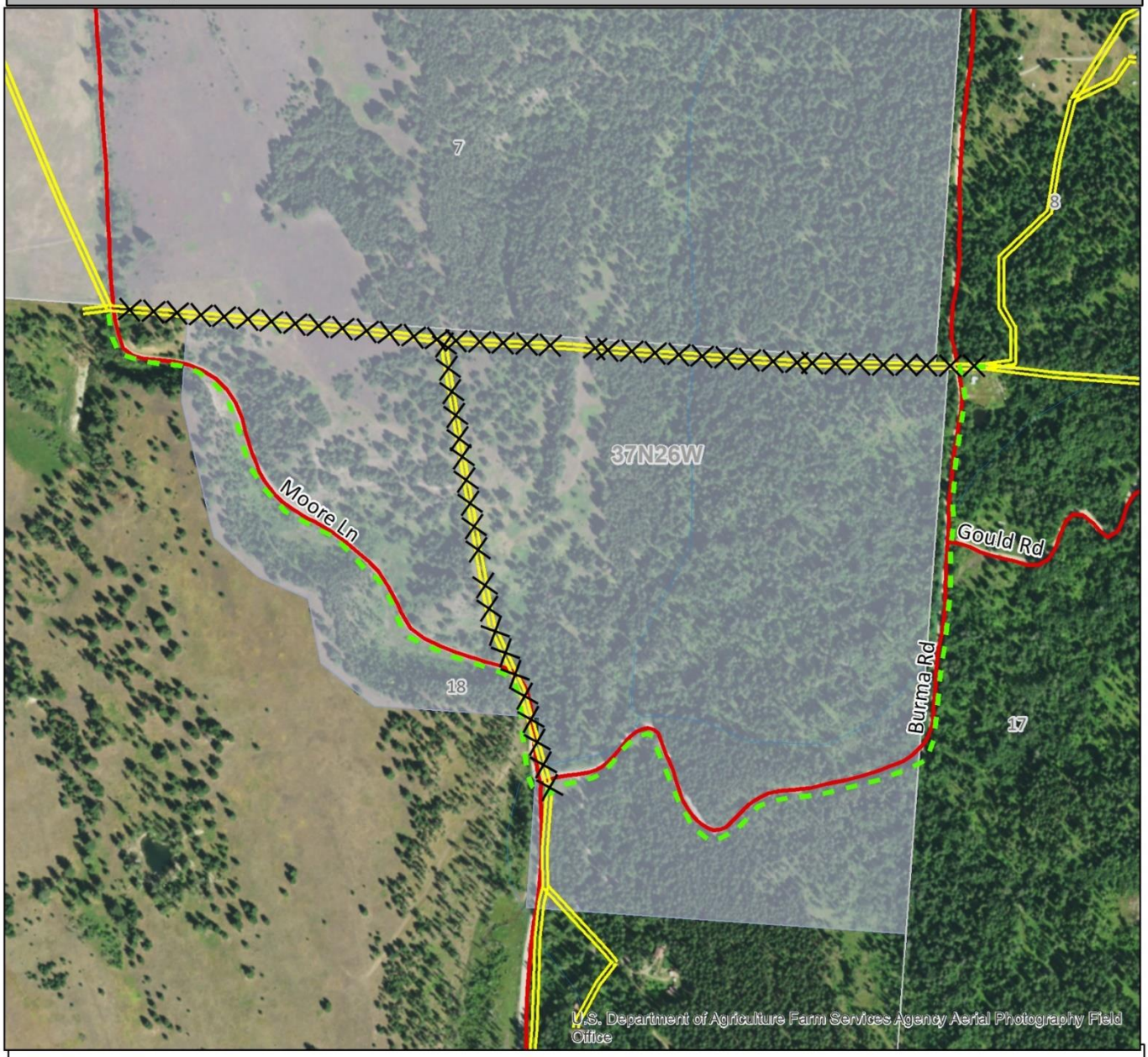


Figure 2. Proposed Easement Change on WRWMA

MONTANA **FWP**

Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc.



Major Roads

Proposed Line Removal

Proposed Line Instalation

Existing Powerline

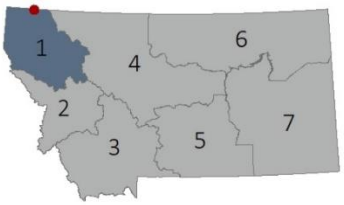
US Forest Service

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

N

Map Produced by: Wildlife-R1
Ethan Lula-Eureka Wildlife Biologist
5-1-2020

Area of Interest



Disclaimer & Credits Example: Valid for the 2018 Hunting Season..... Possession of this map does not constitute legal access to private land ....
It is every hunter's responsibility to know the land ownership of the area he or she intends to hunt
.....Administrative boundaries and FWP Lands data from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Helena, MT. Background Imagery from ESRI...

Miles 0 0.075 0.15

3. **Name of Project:**

Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA

4. **Location of Project**

The 1,474-acre WRWMA is located 5.5 miles north of Eureka, Montana in Lincoln County. The property lies on the western edge of the Whitefish Range. The northern boundary of the WRWMA is the Canadian border. The proposed project area includes of Sections 17 and 18 of Township 37 North, Range 26 West.

5. **Agency Authority for Proposed Action**

FWP is authorized by law to own and manage lands as wildlife habitat. The land subject to this proposal is included in the WRWMA, which was originally deeded to FWP from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1978. The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsed this proposal in June 2020, allowing FWP to proceed with further development and analysis of this proposed action, including completion of this Environmental Assessment.

6. **Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency):** Not Applicable

7. **Anticipated Schedule**

Public Comment Period: June 25 – July 25, 2020
Decision Notice Published: August 4, 2020
Estimated Commencement Date: September 1, 2020
Estimated Completion Date: September 30, 2020
Current Status of Project Design (% complete): 65%

8. **Project size--estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

Land Type	**Affected Area (estimated in acres)**
(a) Developed:	
Residential	0
Industrial	0
(b) Open Space/ Woodlands/ Recreation	1.6
(c) Wetlands/ Riparian Areas	0
(d) Floodplain	0
(e) Productive:	
Irrigated Cropland	0
Dry Cropland	0
Forestry	0
Rangeland	0
Other	0

9. **Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.**

   (a) **Permits:** none required
   (b) **Funding:** none required
   (c) **Other Overlapping Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**

Agency Name:	Type of Responsibility:
U.S. Forest Service	Fire Protection
Lincoln County	Weed Management
Montana State Historic Preservation Office	Cultural and Historic Resources

10. **Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:**

Alternative A: No Action

No change to Lincoln Electric utility easements will be considered at this time. Existing overhead power lines will remain in place and continue to be maintained by Lincoln Electric staff throughout the year. A buried line will not be installed along the proposed route.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

The proposed action would include:

- Removal of approximately 0.86 miles of overhead powerline from the WMA
- Installation of approximately 0.65 miles of buried powerline along existing WMA roads
- Modification of existing right-of-way easements held by Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc.

Under this proposal, FWP is proposing to exchange those portions of Lincoln Electric's held right of way easement associated with the proposed overhead powerline removal, for a new easement along portions of existing roads on the WMA. The remainder of Lincoln Electric's held right-of-way easements on the WRWMA would remain unaltered at this time.

The proposed underground route would parallel two existing roadways (Burma Road and Moore Lane). Starting at the NE corner of T37N26W S18 the line would be buried on the east side of the Burma Rd., on private property, and continue for approximately 0.25 mi. Here, Burma Rd turns west, onto the WMA and continues for approximately 0.32 mi. At the junction of Burma Road and Moore Lane, the line would cross Burma Road and follow the west side of Moore Lane. After crossing onto private property for approximately 281 ft, the line would parallel Moore Lane, on the WMA for 0.34 mi. In total, approximately 0.65 miles of line would be buried on the WMA.

Much of the proposed route follows an abandoned copper phone line installed by Interbel Telephone Company, under a county road right-of-of way, prior to WMA acquisition in 1978. Records on file at the

Clerk and Recorder's office in Libby indicate that roads traversing the WMA were formally abandoned by the county in 1968. A similar easement (opposite side of Burma Road and Moore Lane) was granted to Interbel Telephone Co., by the Fish and Wildlife Commission, in May 2010.

FWP is in favor of a direct exchange of easements. It is unlikely that the value of the new underground easement would be greater than the portion of overhead easement being ceded by Lincoln Electric, given the smaller footprint on the WRWMA. Additionally, removing the overhead lines from the WRWMA provide several safety and environmental benefits which include:

- Mitigating the risk of an accidental fire on the WRWMA.
- Returning portions of the WMA to a more natural aesthetic
- Improving big game winter security by moving the right-of-way easement to existing roads and allowing utility maintenance consistent with WMA closure dates
- Reducing the potential of avian collision with overhead lines on the WRWMA
- Reducing the potential of wildlife or human electrocution from downed overhead lines
- Improving safety when conducting aerial game surveys on the WRWMA

All work associated with powerline removal and installation would be conducted by Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. staff, at no cost to FWP. Access to the project areas would be from existing roads and to minimize the spread of noxious weeds, all equipment would be required to be cleaned before moving onto the FWP lands. Exposed bare mineral soils would be reseeded immediately and any weed infestations would be treated with herbicides indefinitely through annual weed management efforts. FWP would work with Lincoln Electric staff to ensure due diligence given for the easement trade and draft a new right-of-way easement for the WRWMA.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

1. **Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.**

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. LAND RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X		Yes	1b
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

1b. The proposed action will result in minimal surface disturbance along its entire length. Disturbed areas will be reseeded with a perennial grass mixture. The proposed route for the underground line will follow existing roadways and underground cables.

2. AIR Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. ***For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Air Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

3. WATER Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. *Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
n. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Water Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

4. VEGETATION **Will the proposed action result in?**	**IMPACT ***					
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?		X				
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		Yes	4e
f. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Vegetation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

4e. Ground disturbance associated with road use and maintenance and operating equipment off-road has the potential to create areas that would allow for the establishment or spread of noxious weeds. Noxious weed spread will be mitigated by requiring equipment to be washed before entering the WRWMA, reseeding disturbed areas with a native grass seed mix, and implementing noxious weed management treatments.

** 5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?		X				
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X		Yes	5g.
h. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)			X		No	5h.
i. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Fish and Wildlife:

5g. The Woods Ranch WMA is an important wintering area for elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep. Activities during the winter period could cause disturbance to individual animals but would not likely impact populations. The negative effects on wildlife can be minimized by completing the work within the proposed timeline

5h. Grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos)* occasionally frequent the area during their non-hibernating season. However, the proposed action is expected to have no impact on overall grizzly bear behavior, populations, or habitat.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?			X		No	6a
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?			X		No	6d
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Noise/Electrical Effects (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

6a. Residences are located within 1/4 mile of the project area. The WRWMA is open to the public from May 15 through November 30 annually. Except on designated open roads and county roads, public access to the WRWMA is by non-motorized travel and the area is used in the spring through fall by the public for hiking, hunting, and wildlife viewing. Equipment associated with removing the above-ground power lines and burying the new line would temporarily increase noise levels.

6d. Neighboring residences may experience temporary power outages associated with replacing the power lines.

7. LAND USE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Use (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

8. RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?			X			8a.
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Risk/Health Hazards (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

8a. Oil/fluid spills associated with equipment use may occur. This will be mitigated by Lincoln Electric ensuring all equipment is in good working order. Lincoln Electric will report and clean up any large spills.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT ***					
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?			X		No	9e
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Community Impact (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

9e. Maintenance equipment and vehicles associated with powerline removal and installation will slightly increase traffic on Moore Lane and Burma Road. The disruption of traffic would be minimal and occur only during line installation and removal.

10. PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT ***					
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**	**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads		X				

10. PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:						
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. **Define projected revenue sources		X				
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10f
g. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Public Services/Taxes/Utilities (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

10f. Post-project maintenance costs may include routine noxious weed treatment as part of routine WMA maintenance.

** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				1a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				

** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
c. **Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:			X			11e

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Aesthetics/Recreation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

11e. The Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is an area of scenic enjoyment while providing important habitat for wildlife. It also provides many hours of hunting opportunity during the fall months. The proposed timeline does fall within the archery hunting season, though the impacts to hunters should be minor. Signs will be posted at WRWMA parking areas to alert hunters about Lincoln Electric operations during the proposed timeline. The removal of the overhead powerlines will improve the aesthetics of the WMA.

12. CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				12d
e. Other:						

12. CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Cultural/Historical Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

12d FWP would consult with the State Historic Preservation office (SHPO) on this proposed project and avoid altering heritage properties or paleontological remains. If cultural artifacts were to be discovered during the project, FWP would cease activities and contact SHPO, and potentially adjust the project design to avoid impacting these resources.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. ***For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)						
g. ****For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Significance Criteria (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

PART III. PUBLIC PARTICPATION AND COLLABORATORS

1. **Public Involvement**

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current environmental assessment (EA):

- Public notices in each of these papers: *Tobacco Valley News, Flathead Beacon, Helena Independent Record*
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: http://fwp.mt.gov ("Recent Public Notices")
- Copies of this EA may be obtained by mail from FWP Region 1 Office, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901; by phoning 406-751-4579; or by emailing Stevie.Burton@mt.gov.

Comments should be directed by: mail to Ethan Lula, PO Box 2084, Eureka, MT 59917; phone to 406-882-4109; or email to Ethan.Lula@mt.gov. Comments must be received by FWP no later than 5:00 p.m. on July 25, 2020.

Notice of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. **Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required?** No
   If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

No. Based upon the above assessment which has identified a limited number of minor impacts to the physical and human environment that will be either for a short duration or that the effects of the proposed project can be mitigated below the level of significance, an EIS in not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

2. **Name, title, address and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:**

Ethan Lula, Wildlife Biologist, Eureka, MT, 406-882-4109

3. **List of entities consulted during preparation of the EA**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks – Wildlife Division

Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc.